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## ***Saudi Arabia Exporting Salafi Education and Radicalizing Indonesia's Muslims***

Amanda Kovacs

Salafis, who defend a very conservative, literal interpretation of Islam and treat Shia Muslims with hostility, are not just a phenomenon in the Middle East. They are increasingly pressuring Shias and other religious minorities in Indonesia, too.

### **Analysis**

Saudi Arabia is the world's main provider of Islamic education. In addition to promoting Salafism and maligning other religious communities, Saudi educational materials present the kingdom in a favorable light and can also exacerbate religious strife, as they are doing in Indonesia. The Saudi educational program aims to create global alliances and legitimize the Saudi claim to be the leader of Islam – at home and abroad.

- Since switching to democracy in 1998, Indonesia has been shaken time and again by Salafi religious discrimination and violence, often on the part of graduates of LIPIA College in Jakarta, which was founded by Saudi Arabia in 1980.
- Domestically, Saudi Arabia uses educational institutions to stabilize the system; since the 1960s, it has become the largest exporter of Islamic education. After Saudi Arabia began to fight with Iran for religious hegemony in 1979, it founded schools and universities worldwide to propagate its educational traditions.
- In Jakarta, LIPIA represents a Saudi microcosm where Salafi norms and traditions prevail. LIPIA not only helps Saudi Arabia to influence Indonesian society, it also provides a gateway to all of Southeast Asia.
- As long as Muslim societies fail to create attractive government-run educational institutions for their citizens, there will be ample room for Saudi influence.

*Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, education policy, Salafism*

## Salafism Is Polarizing Indonesia's Muslims

Although Indonesia was a popular example for the peaceful coexistence of the most varied religions under Suharto's military dictatorship (1967–1998), since democracy was introduced in 1998, numerous religious conflicts have come to the fore (Human Rights Watch 2013). While these conflicts were repressed by Suharto, the new room to maneuver means that in predominantly Sunni Indonesia conflicts are now erupting with greater intensity.<sup>1</sup> Since 2011, there has been a dramatic increase in violence against and discrimination of Shia Muslims.<sup>2</sup> In February 2011, a group of 200 Sunnis devastated a Shiite boarding school in Bangil and injured nine pupils. That December, another boarding school in Sampang was violently attacked. Its 300 residents were driven out and are still living in emergency shelters. Tajul Muluk, the director of the destroyed Shia establishment, was sentenced to two years in prison for blasphemy. When he appealed, his sentence was increased to four years. In 2012, the minister for religious affairs, Suryadharma Ali, stated that Shia Islam is a false interpretation of Islam. In this year's presidential election campaign, conservative Sunni leaders like Cholil Ridwan, who was trained at the Islamic University in Medina, called for crusades against the candidate Joko Widodo (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan, PDI-P), because it was rumored that if victorious, he might name the Shiite intellectual Jalaluddin Rakhmat as minister for religious affairs (*Vice News* 2014).

These antagonistic attitudes among parts of the Indonesian population towards the Shia minority, estimated at approximately 2.5 million, are also transferred to other non-Sunni groups. Ahmadis also suffer violent persecution and deadly attacks, which Indonesian law either does not punish at all or only very

mildly penalizes, with just a few months in prison. On the other hand, Ahmadis in Indonesia have been forbidden to proselytize since 2008. Violators risk five years' imprisonment.

Most of the violent acts against Muslim minorities are carried out by members of the Salafi<sup>3</sup> Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI), founded in 1999. Wrapped in white robes and turbans, FPI members set out with wooden clubs to attack what in their view are dissidents and un-Islamic establishments – people who belong to the Liberal Islam Network (Jaringan Islam Liberal, JIL), and discotheques, nightclubs, and restaurants that serve alcohol. The FPI is modeled on the Saudi religious police, who act as moral guardians. FPI founder Habib Rizieq attended the Saudi Islamic and Arabic College of Indonesia (Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab, LIPIA)<sup>4</sup> in Jakarta, then continued his studies in Riyadh with a Saudi government scholarship.

The Indonesian Salafi Warriors of Jihad (Laskar Jihad, LJ) was founded in the year 2000, when Muslims and Christians were violently clashing on the eastern Moluccan islands. Before it was disbanded in 2002, the LJ mobilized thousands of Indonesian Muslims, trained them militarily, and led them to fight Christians. The group was identifiable by their broad white pants and shirts reminiscent of traditional Saudi clothing, and their machetes. The founding of the LJ, its violence, and its subsequent dissolution were justified by legal opinions of Saudi and Yemeni scholars whom the LJ founder Jafar Umar Thalib consulted in consideration of the situation in the Moluccas.

Like the FPI founder, Jafar Umar Thalib graduated from LIPIA, the Saudi college in Jakarta. It is striking that many prominent Indonesian Salafis attended LIPIA. LIPIA alumni Abu Nida, Ahmad Faiz Asifuddin, and Aunur Rafiq Ghuftron are key actors in the spread of Salafism through *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools); LIPIA graduates Zain al-

1 The following information is the result of the author's fieldwork in Indonesia and her source evaluations.

2 With more than 191 million Muslims, Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population; its 240 million inhabitants make it the world's fourth-largest nation by population. Six religions are officially recognized: Islam (approx. 87 percent of the population), Protestantism (7 percent), Catholicism (3 percent), Hinduism (1.9 percent), Buddhism (1 percent), and Confucianism (0.13 percent).

3 Salafism is understood as a literal reading of the Koran, which, with the Hadith, is supposed to inform all aspects of life. The academic literature distinguishes between political and jihadist Salafists, who are ready to use violence, and the quietistic, who are not interested in any political activities. For an introduction see: Said and Fouad 2014.

4 See: <[www.lipia.org](http://www.lipia.org)>.

Muttaqin, Nurcholis Ridwan, and Hepi Andi founded the anti-West, anti-Semitic, Salafist magazine *Sabili*.

Guided by the values and traditions of the “Wahhabi” Salafism of Saudi Arabia, these Islamist actors foment inter- and intra-religious tension in Indonesian society. Not only is their religious engagement Islamizing Indonesia with shades of Salafism, it is also Arabizing the country.

In the Saudi government’s effort to spread Salafism, and especially its anti-Shia ideology, transnational educational institutions like LIPIA in Indonesia play an important role in building alliances. Following the 1979 Shia revolution in Iran and the Iranian/Saudi hegemonic conflict that ensued, Indonesia took on major strategic importance for Saudi religious politics. With the world’s largest Muslim population, Indonesia is of particular interest to Saudi Arabia, which views it as the base and gateway for relations with the Muslims of Southeast Asia. Each year Indonesia sends the largest share of Muslim pilgrims to the holy places in Mecca and Medina (*hajj*). This religious tourism brings money into the country, so Saudi Arabia also has a financial interest in maintaining good relations with Indonesia.

### **Islamic Education Helps Legitimize Saudi Arabia Domestically**

Saudi transnational educational institutions reflect the country’s self-image and export its educational content. Educational establishments also serve an important domestic function for Saudi Arabia: spreading its own interpretation of Islam, and legitimizing and stabilizing the regime. Since it was established in 1932, the Saudi kingdom has had credibility problems: on the one hand, its rulers preach the very strict Wahhabism that rejects modernity and a Western lifestyle, while on the other, the country maintains close political and economic relations with the West, especially the USA. While modern technology and twenty-first-century Western consumer behavior have long since become commonplace in Saudi Arabia, civil rights, women’s rights

and the rights of religious minorities reflect its conservative tribal culture. These political and social contradictions are fodder for the opposition, and especially for the Salafis, who understand an Islamic state as one that renounces everything Western and consider the House of Saud to be illegitimate. With this view, in 1979 heavily armed Islamist radicals seized the Grand Mosque of Mecca, denouncing the royal dynasty and criticizing Wahhabi scholars for supporting it. In an attempt to prevent similar uprisings, Saudi Arabia has since sought to socialize its citizens in conformity with the state. Saudi educational institutions teach Wahhabism and peddle a positive image of the royal family, describing the country as chosen by God to be Islam’s global center and the leader of the Muslim world. Saudi pedagogy generally opposes free and critical thinking and teaches blind obedience and submission to the existing religious-political order.

Scholarly analyses (Center for Religious Freedom of Freedom House 2006; Groiss 2003) of the ideology taught in Saudi schoolbooks find that it promotes an antipluralistic worldview with stereotypes of the enemy. The teaching material is intended to cement loyalty to the supposedly single, true, and immutable Islam – an interpretation that sets apart the Saudi form of Islam, and preaches hatred of atheists, Jews, Christians, Hindus, and all Muslim groups that do not follow the Saudi interpretation, especially Sufis and Shias. Textbooks also teach that the West is a permanent threat to Muslims – from the time of the Crusades and continuing with international Zionism, which strives for world domination and is pushing Muslims into the defensive. Other threats come from Western ideologies such as nationalism, communism, socialism, secularism, humanism, and existentialism.

Saudi schoolbooks place significant value on proper Muslim behavior and strict traditional Wahhabi bans regarding everyday life – on music, singing, wearing silk, and using gold and silver. Shia and mystical religious practices are considered to be idolatrous. Strict adherence to gender segregation and proper clothing for women, which includes total veiling, except for a slit for the eyes and

the hands, is pushed. In addition to Wahhabi doctrine, Saudi textbooks also spread political propaganda aimed at concealing the contradictions between Wahhabi belief and Western modernity within the Saudi state.

History texts in particular glorify the role of the Saudi founding father, King Abd al-Aziz, who reigned from 1932 to 1953. The Saud family rule is portrayed as legitimate because the king unified the warring Arab tribes on the Arabian peninsula, led them to the "true Islam," and ensured law and order. Saudi Arabian history is presented as a process of modernization: the King introduced great advances in education, health services, technology, communication, and social affairs. The country's role in the Muslim world is presented as outstanding, as indicated by the numerous international Islamic organizations, such as the Muslim World League (1962)<sup>5</sup> and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC, 1969),<sup>6</sup> that it has founded. After the 11 September 2001 attacks, which involved 15 Saudi nationals, pressure from the USA led Saudi Arabia to announce that it was going to revise its national curriculum and remove discriminatory, antipluralistic passages. In the end, however, the reform was superficial: Saudi teaching materials remain very intolerant (Steinberg 2007).

### **Saudi Arabia Becomes the Main Exporter of Islamic Education**

Since the 1960s Saudi Arabia has become the biggest exporter of Islamic education. This development has been driven by certain domestic and global political turning points, beginning with the so-called Arab Cold War, in which socialist Egypt, under President Gamal Abd al-Nasser, and Saudi Arabia used educational institutions to battle for ideological hegemony. In 1961, Egypt's Law No. 103 was enacted to nationalize and centralize Cairo's tradition-steeped Islamic al-Azhar University. The reform granted al-Azhar scholars control of the Islamic heritage and encouraged

them to proselytize abroad. Al-Azhar was declared the center for propagating Islam and Nasser's Arab-Socialist vision of pan-Arabism. This was a frontal attack on Saudi Arabia's religious and political status within the Muslim world; in reaction and as a countering institution to al-Azhar, the Islamic University of Medina was founded that same year. Wahhabi scholars run the university; from the beginning, the stated goal was the international mission, which today occurs mostly through generous scholarships for foreign students.

The Muslim World League, officially a nongovernmental organization, was founded in 1962. With Saudis in all major positions and the Saudi state by far the League's largest funder, it is effectively an institution of Saudi foreign policy. The Muslim World League maintains a global network of educational establishments, cultural centers, mosques, publishing companies, and aid organizations that promote Wahhabi/Salafi Islam and legitimize Saudi rule. The League's ability to foment or stoke religious conflicts is viewed critically (Steinberg 2004). A few years after Egypt and Saudi Arabia began to compete for global leadership of the Muslim community, King Faisal (reign: 1964–1975) ascended the Saudi throne. He combined his pan-Islamic worldview with his plan to modernize the country and developed the Wahhabi line in the Saudi curriculum to distance himself from Nasser and socialism.

When, in 1973, oil brought wealth to Saudi Arabia, Faisal invested in the Muslim World League. Saudi Arabia's new prosperity allowed the kingdom to demonstrate its leadership of the Muslim world by becoming the largest funder of transnational educational institutions for propagating the Wahhabi worldview and Saudi political propaganda – and thus to secure alliances. Saudi Arabia became the world's premier exporter of Islamic education. In Riyadh in 1974, the Imam Muhammad bin Saud University was founded; with the Islamic Universities in Mecca and Medina, it formed the core of the Saudi religious university system, and it developed into the largest Wahhabi educational institution in the country. To this day it trains most of the country's scholars: judges, imams, religious teachers, missionaries, and function-

5 See: <[www.themwl.org](http://www.themwl.org)>.

6 See: <[www.oic-oic.org](http://www.oic-oic.org)>.



aries of the religious police. It has five international branches – in the Emirate Ras al-Khaimah, Djibouti, Tokyo, Fairfax (USA), and Jakarta – and grants a large number of scholarships to foreigners to study Islam in Riyadh. Since 1979 and Iran's Islamic revolution, transnational educational institutions have become much more significant for Saudi foreign policy. The Iranian revolution ended Saudi Arabia's supremacy in the Islamic world: The Shiite theocracy strives to deprive the Saudi regime of its legitimacy and its role as protector of the holy sites in Mecca and Medina. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia must always reckon with uprisings of its own repressed Shia population. In the Saudi/Iranian struggle for hegemony, Saudi educational institutions play a major role in repressing Shia Islam in other countries and establishing international ideological alliances.<sup>7</sup>

### **LIPIA: A Saudi Microcosm in Jakarta**

In 1980, in reaction to Iran's Islamic revolution, the Saudi government founded LIPIA, a branch of the Imam Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh, to be an ideological bulwark in Jakarta. LIPIA offers a bachelor's degree in Islamic Law, a diploma program for Arabic-language teachers, and preparatory courses for both programs. LIPIA comes under the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education and is entirely financed by Saudi Arabia. The curricula and teaching materials reflect the Saudi worldview. Although LIPIA does not subscribe to Indonesia's concept of a religiously pluralistic democratic society, the Indonesian government allows it to operate freely. LIPIA is seen as helping Indonesia to

solidify its bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia; its presence helps to upgrade Indonesia's ailing educational infrastructure. Indonesian government educational institutions suffer from a lack of financing, poor facilities, and insufficiently trained lecturers.

The teaching of Arabic as the language of Islamic culture is quantitatively and qualitatively underdeveloped in Indonesia. LIPIA's modern facilities and native-speaker Arabic instructors create an important role for LIPIA in Indonesia's Islamic educational system. In terms of services for students, who are strictly separated by gender on campus like in Saudi Arabia, LIPIA is unequaled in Indonesia. Students receive monthly allowances and free medical care; some even get free dormitory accommodation.

LIPIA mostly seeks to attract Muslim students from Indonesia's eastern, mostly Christian regions, as well students from elsewhere in Southeast Asia – in order to strengthen Islam wherever it is a minority religion or has mixed with other religions or cultures. Top male students, who are willing to learn the Koran by heart and can be expected to propagate Saudi ideas in Southeast Asia, are given grants for the Imam Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh. Their stay in Riyadh is intended to make them more committed to Wahhabi values and more sympathetic to Saudi rule.

Lessons in Jakarta transfer deeply rooted discourses from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia, with teachers required to impart the superiority of the Hanbali School of Law. Saudi Arabia is presented as the only country where Islamic law is properly implemented, while Arabic texts and statements by lecturers glorify Saudi Arabia's origin, the House of Saud, and the country's significance for the Muslim world. Arabic classes serve as vehicles for both Islamic and political propaganda.

LIPIA has also set out to translate – from Arabic into Indonesian and other Southeast Asian languages – and disseminate writings on Saudi religious and political authorities as well as essays on certain religious subjects. The Indonesian-language publications, which circulate on the LIPIA campus, propagate the Wahhabi worldview and antago-

<sup>7</sup> The conflict is based on the contrasting worldviews of Sunni and Shia Islam and the different political systems. Since 1744 Saudi Arabia has been based on an alliance between the Islam reformer Abd al-Wahhab and the ruler Ibn Saud – a symbiosis of worldly and religious power. Saudi Wahhabi scholars, who take as their model the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed and his followers as well as the literalist Hanbali School of Islamic Law, run religious life in Saudi Arabia, while the descendants of Ibn Saud rule politically. Wahhabi scholars and the Saudi people are depoliticized; there are no elections. In contrast, Iranian Shia legal scholars have leading positions in government, and elections allow Iranians some degree of political participation.

nisms such as hatred of Shia Muslims, and legitimize Saudi domestic and foreign policy.

Everyday life on campus is permeated by commandments and prohibitions intended to shape the students according to the Saudi model: Wearing jeans, loud laughter, listening to music, and watching television are all prohibited. In contrast, the common dress style for Saudi men – ankle-length linen pants, sandals, goatees – and the use of *neem* sticks are all encouraged. These characteristic Salafi signs are supposedly based on the Prophet's practices. Women are expected to veil themselves completely.

LIPIA encourages Indonesian Islamists and permits the Indonesian Muslim Student Action Union (Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia, KAMMI), whose declared goal is to establish an Islamic state, to be active on campus. KAMMI is considered to be the student wing of the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS), which is modeled on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and LIPIA is generally held to be a collecting tank for future PKS supporters. After the Muslim Brotherhood was violently suppressed in Egypt in May 2014, Saudi Arabia declared it a "terrorist organization." The influence this will have on LIPIA's relationship to KAMMI and the PKS remains to be seen.

LIPIA's networking strategy is obvious: Over the years its collaboration with the Indonesian state has grown noticeably closer. Today a B.A. degree in Islamic Law from LIPIA is considered equivalent to a B.A. from one of Indonesia's national Islamic universities, which are viewed as liberal. This allows LIPIA graduates to continue their studies at Indonesian Islamic universities, which they can infiltrate with their Salafi thought. Highly qualified LIPIA lecturers are similarly allowed to teach at Indonesian institutions of higher education.

Although LIPIA's influence on the spread of Salafism in Indonesia should not be underestimated, it appears that lots of students deal pragmatically with its regulations. For example, many students follow the LIPIA dress code on campus but not at home.

## **Saudi Educational Exports Are Challenging Societal Concepts Based on the Nation-State**

For decades, Saudi Arabia has taken advantage of the failure of most Muslim societies to offer their citizens good educational opportunities and Islamic education in an environment with modern facilities. The Saudi educational institutes' support for Salafism and glorification of Saudi rule challenge the host countries' educational traditions; Saudi transnational educational establishments become reservoirs for Islamist ideologies that question the host society's status quo and the right of other religious communities to exist. Collaboration between Saudi and local institutions and organizations is particularly insidious for secular or religiously pluralist societies, and countries that do not invest in their educational systems remain open to Saudi influence. As the politically radical Salafi movements show, the Saudi educational offerings could challenge the legitimacy of the Indonesian state, and even lead to political uprisings. Western educational aid that encourages democratic values and religious pluralism offers a broad range of possibilities for counteracting this Saudi activity.

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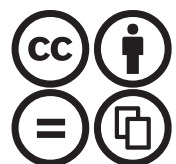
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